



THE AGITATOR NETWORK

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Bulletin for trade union and workplace activists - Produced by Workers Power supporters

Organise the rank and file!

When one thousand trade union activists respond to a call from the Socialist Alliance to come to a conference on the Political Fund and the fight against privatisation you just know that something is going on.

There is a real sense of revival in the labour movement and rank and file workers are looking at how they can take the new wave of struggles forward.

The rise in the number of strikes, in successful votes for strike action and in militancy across a number of unions is being reflected in a shift to the left at the top of the unions. The old right-wing union leaders were not doing the things that could reach out to the great mass of unorganised workers, nor were they proving to their own members that their organisations were doing enough to defend them.

In the most recent round of elections pro-strike, left-wing union leaders have begun to win in ballot after ballot. Billy Hayes and Mark Serwotka (in the CWU and PCS respectively) were written off as no-hopers. Yet both won elections by comfortable margins. Bob Crow in the RMT was the most recent victor, winning the general secretaryship of the RMT comfortably despite a massive press witch-hunt and, as it turns out, a covert operation by the TUC itself to undermine his campaign.

More and more members want fighting unions to take on the Labour government and the viciously anti-union bosses, such as those who run the train companies and now Consignia (the post office). The election of new left leaders symbolises the anger of the rank and file that is manifest in the recent strikes that have taken place on the rail, in the civil service, in education and other sectors.

But should militants just rely on new leaders? These new general secretaries may be a lot better than the old ones, but they are still subjected to enormous pressures - not only from the bosses but from within the huge bureaucracy that dominates the trade unions.

They are still tied down by all sorts of rules and regulations that are stacked in favour of the right wing. Above all, they are not fully accountable to their members, for the simple reason that in the trade union movement real rank and file democracy does not exist. Most decisions are in the hands of the full time officials - crucially, decisions over action.



Striking teachers march through London in support of better pay and conditions.

What is the best way of avoiding a new round of defeats and of seeing the new left leaders incorporated into the bureaucratic machines that do so much to break the fighting spirit of the union members?

The key is organising rank and file members into permanent fighting organisations.

These would hold their leaders to account and replace them - even the most left-wing ones - when they either sell-out or fail to stop the right selling out, and transform the unions themselves into effective, militant and democratic organisations controlled by the members themselves. ■

Build a rank and file movement within and across the unions

The first task of such a movement is to rebuild the traditions of solidarity lost during the years of defeat. It will also need to organise strike committees capable of controlling action and preventing it being undermined by the bureaucrats.

It must fight to break the grip of the bureaucrats by winning the right to hold regular elections, recalling elected leaders and ensuring that all officials are only paid the average wage of the workers they represent.

It must breathe new life into the unions by transforming their structures into democratic, vibrant ones that can enthuse and mobilise the members. Above all it must force the unions to reach out and organise the unorganised.

The tasks of a rank and file movement today, however, go far beyond these trade union questions. With Labour in office there is a growing mood in the unions to punish it for its policies of privatisation, of maintaining and even talking of extending, the anti-union laws

for its pro-business agenda.

Billy Hayes of the CWU has threatened to withhold money from Labour, John Edmonds has actually cut funding to the party. The fire-fighters' union, the FBU, agreed last year to open up its political fund to working class organisations other than the Labour Party. Unison members voted to review the use of their political fund to bank roll Labour.

This campaign on the political fund - being pushed forward by the Socialist Alliance trade union conference - raises an urgent question for any rank and file movement: what should replace Labour? We are against non-political trade unionism and we are for the democratisation of the political fund. But if we win the battle to democratise it, what is the alternative to Labour?

A new rank and file movement would have to thrash out an answer - one we believe lies in building a new party, a working class alter-continued on page 2...



A message from Post Office workers in Edinburgh

Strikes must be back in fashion - even the police want to down truncheons! Here at Agitator we don't care much for the police - they tend to be a bit unfriendly on picket lines and demos. But a lot of other strikes - like those at Manchester Airport - are pointing the way forward - mass action to beat back attacks by the bosses.

As union membership starts to rise, as the number of union recognition deals goes up and as Labour keeps on doing the bosses' dirty work, more and more workers are fighting back.

Blair and his ministers talk about this as a return to the "dark days of the 1970s", as a return to "outdated" industrial relations. Rubbish. There is nothing dark or outdated about workers voting by majorities for action and then implementing that action in order to defend themselves, their jobs and their livelihoods.

Currently the annual average number of strikes is around 250, compared with 2,000 in the 1970s. But the trend is at last upwards again, and, in the first months of 2002 a number of major disputes have broken out.

The most significant have been on the railways and in the benefit offices, involving RMT, ASLEF and PCS members. The issues were around pay and disciplinary procedures (on the rail) and health and safety in the benefit offices. The PCS is also involved in a growing number of strikes over pay in places as diverse as the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ombudsman's Office.

On the rail, the unions are confronting an unruly gang of privateers desperately trying to claw back lost profits after the post-Hatfield collapse of passenger confidence and the debacle at Railtrack that resulted in it being taken out of the hands of its shareholders if not re-nationalised.

The bosses are deliberately provoking strikes by making derisory pay offers and victimising union activists. They hope to cut costs and break the two most powerful rail unions, the RMT and the drivers' union, ASLEF.

The mood for action over pay is there in other sectors too. The post workers' union, the CWU, recently held a ballot for strike action demanding a five per cent increase

(management were offering two per cent). The vote for action was 63 per cent in favour, 37 per cent against and a one strike has finally been called. A ballot is being organised by London Unison over London Weighting.

On 14 March London teachers staged their first strike over pay for almost 30 years. Thousands took to the streets and schools across the capital were closed.

The issue of pay is at the forefront because public sector workers have gained least during the years of the boom. Low pay is the norm in the public sector, and workers are sick of it - they expected more from a Labour government that their votes did much to install in office two elections running. At the same time workers in the public sector are angry at the ever present threat of privatisation from New Labour.

When Tony Blair labelled public sector trade unionists as "wreckers" in his recent defence of Labour's privatisation plans the mood of anger and the willingness to take action quickly spread. Let's build on this and give Blair a bloody nose.

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native to Labour. For us such an alternative must not be a re-run of Labour (100 years of trying to reform a system that puts profit before human need). It must be a total alternative to it, a revolutionary party that organises the working class to smash the capitalist system and the state that defends it.

This view may well be a minority one at the moment, but a rank and file movement will soon find itself - as it should - organising international solidarity with workers in places like Argentina, who have no alternative but to revolt against the system.

It will find itself shoulder to shoulder with militant anti-capitalist youth as they brave ranks of riot cops to storm the gatherings of the global rulers and bosses whose policies and institutions govern every aspect of our lives.

In other words, the rank and file movement we need today must begin as an anti-capitalist rank and file movement as well as an anti-bureaucratic one. It must campaign against Labour and confront the question of what alternative party we need.

The potential for revolutionary ideas to spread in such a movement is enormous. The Agitator exists to help them spread. Sign up to our network and join our fight.

A kick in the teeth for local government workers

Let's kick back

"A kick in the teeth" is how Unison's Malcolm Wing has described the 3 per cent pay offer to local government workers. The Agitator agrees.

Around 1.2 million workers work for local councils, providing desperately needed services such as home care, school meals, day centres, housing etc, 270,000 of these workers earn less than £5 an hour and a massive 90 per cent of the low-paid are women part-timers. While the average wage in Britain is around £20,000, two-thirds of council workers get less than £13,044.

Unison activists well know, however, that the annual consultation over the pay claim has for many years been an empty ritual. The regional and national bureaucracies have refused, in the past, to resource a campaign against previous offers of around the 3 per cent mark. Thus when the turn out in the consultation was low, they could justify their inaction on low pay.

So what's happened this year? Following

last year's National Conference where it was clear delegates were increasingly disenchanted with New Labour's drive to privatise, the leadership are all too aware that they can't buy off the members' with empty rhetoric forever.

So now Malcolm Wing is talking of "industrial action as the only way to bring the employers back to the negotiating table".

But whatever the motivation Unison activists and the United Left must organise the liveliest possible campaign for the rejection of the 3 per cent offer, fighting for a huge vote to reject to reject the offer and a big "yes" to industrial action. We should also be clear from the outset that national strike action will be necessary to win our full claim of £1,750 flat rate increase or 6 per cent whichever is greater.

Then we'll really find out how much backbone Malcolm Wing and Dave Prentis have, while the United Left will have a real chance to revitalise our union from the base.

Teaching Labour a lesson



London teachers staged a magnificent strike on 14 March. A huge demo, made up of thousands of new and young teachers, underlined the anger in the schools. Teachers are fed up with being blamed for the crisis in education when they are working flat out - on miserly pay - to offset that crisis and make a failing system work to the benefit of the children.

The strike by the NUT must become the start of a massive campaign to step up the action. Only this will make Estelle Morris, Labour's Education Secretary, and her boss Blair, budge on the issues of pay and teacher shortages.

She has made it clear that the government is not prepared to give London teachers a decent pay rise. Instead they will fiddle around with threshold payments, twiddle about with the odd R&R point here and

there, all because New Labour is not prepared to fund education to the levels actually needed.

So how can we win a big increase in the London allowance? We can't rely on the current union leadership. It is great that the national union moved so quickly to ballot members on this strike, but they could move even more quickly to call our action off. Under the present rules of the union we, NUT rank and file union members, do not control the action.

The first thing we need is an elected London co-ordinating committee. Such a committee would keep the pressure on the union leadership, making sure further action is organised and guarding against any sell-out.

Further action will be needed if we are to win our claim. If the union leadership refus-

Who decided our claim?

Why aren't we demanding a London allowance equivalent to that paid to the Metropolitan police? Every year at our union conference delegates discuss motions on teachers' salaries. But the Executive and our General Secretary, Doug McAvoy, frequently overturn or ignore whatever is decided.

They have the final say on what we ask for from the School Teachers Pay Review Body. Doug boasted at last year's conference that he didn't give a damn what the conference decided, he would do what he wanted.

London teachers themselves should decide what our pay claim should be. Just as we should be able to decide what action we want to take to win our claim. And once we are on strike we should control the action, through democratically elected strike committees.

Is £6,000 enough? Should we be given free travel like the police? How can we link up the fight for an extra London allowance with the fight against excessive workload?

es to call further action - and its ban on picketing during our strike suggests to us that they don't plan to step things up - we will have to be prepared to take action unofficially. This will have to be built by organising support at a school level and amongst parents and other workers. Teachers are not the only ones who are finding it more and more difficult to live and work in London.

Who suffers from the teacher shortage?

Teachers:

Vacancies in schools mean extra workloads for teachers. Some teachers are being asked to set cover for classes with no permanent teachers. A high turnover means teachers are constantly inducting new members of staff.

Pupils:

Every child's education is affected by shortages and instability. All children find it difficult to adjust to different teachers, yet some have to do this virtually daily. The quality of some supply staff is very high but many are not fully trained and agencies rarely ensure they are properly inducted into the British education system.

Parents:

With many classes having no permanent teachers, parents are unable to contact people whom they know and trust if they are concerned about their child. They do not have regular reports and updates on their child's progress. The press recently reported that one child had as many as 13 teachers in 14 months in South Rotherham.

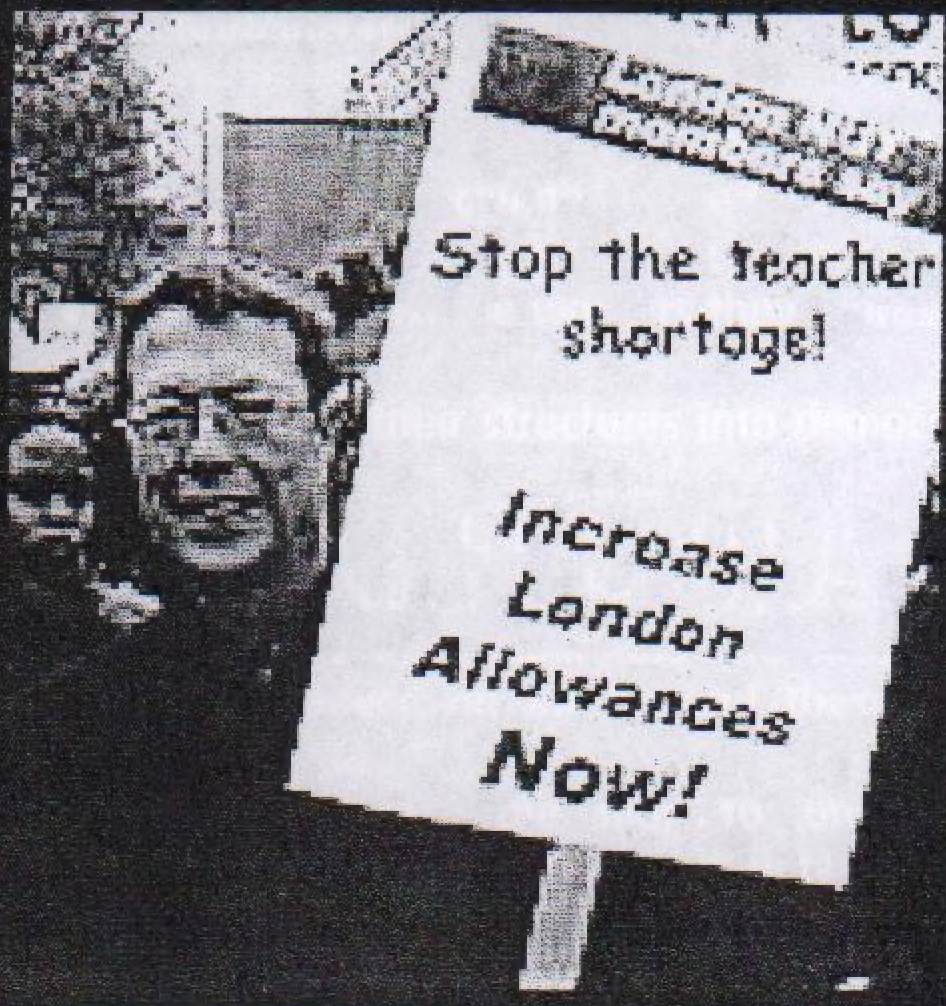
Who doesn't suffer?

The government:

They are getting education on the cheap.

Big Business:

Supply agencies are making a bundle, profiteering on the teacher shortage. And the privateers are sharpening their knives for more choice cuts as the government gets ready to privatise more and more of the education system.



Solidarity

Argentina could be the first of many revolutions simply because many other countries (Mexico, Turkey...) are also on the brink of IMF-imposed meltdown. That's why we must raise international solidarity. The Agitator says:

**Cancel the debt!
Release all prisoners!
End police repression!**

To find out more, invite an Argentinian speaker to your workplace. Contact the Argentina Solidarity Campaign:

☎ 07960-398 152

email: argentinesolidarity@hotmail.com

After the Socialist Alliance Trade Union conference What do we do now?

Everyone who has been to the Socialist Alliance Trade Union conference will rightly ask this question. The Agitator doesn't pretend to have all the answers, but we think the future of the Socialist Alliance itself depends on getting this one right.

Developing a campaign around the political funds, organising to support workers fighting back and building a real socialist alternative to New Labour are all vital and all linked.

Practically this means:

- In every union Socialist Alliance supporters, wherever possible in conjunction with other forces on the left, should fight for the democratisation of the political fund, with the money allocated to working class political organisations in accordance with the support they have inside the unions.
- This involves challenging Labour's monopoly and fighting for the principle of proportional allocation of funds - but only to working class organisations. Not a penny should go to bosses' parties like the Lib-Dems or SNP, or to so-called "non-class" parties like the Greens. Supporters should organise debates in as many union branches and workplaces as possible to win this position and follow it through with organised votes to decide fund allocation.
- Such a campaign will inevitably bring the Alliance into conflict with the trade union bureaucracy and pose the need to broaden the campaign into a fight for union democracy across the board. The Socialist Alliance should take a lead in this fight and help build a rank and file movement that is both anti-capitalist and anti-bureaucratic.

To further these aims the Socialist Alliance should re-convene this conference in the autumn in order to discuss broadening the campaign out into a real, organised rank and file campaign for union democracy and in support of all workers taking action - including supporting them against the trade union leaders when they try to sell-out, as well as against the bosses and New Labour.

Above all, the Socialist Alliance needs to decide what it wants to be. At the moment it exists primarily as an electoral alternative

to New Labour. But between elections it has all too often faded from the scene. Workers, rightly, won't take such an alternative seriously and the Socialist Alliance risks disappearing into obscurity. The Socialist Alliance needs to re-consider its whole future - either it sets itself the goal of rallying workers to an alternative party, fighting on every single front of struggle and winning over sections of the unions to the project of a new party or it becomes another historical footnote.

The Agitator believes we need a new party and it should openly commit itself to the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism.

At the moment many won't agree with us. But they do agree on the need for a new party. Let us unite around the aim of creating one and then - in the context of becoming deeply rooted in the working class and involved in its daily struggles - debate and decide democratically what the basis of such a party should be.

We are convinced that in the test of real industrial and anti-capitalist struggles - far more than in elections - more and more will come to recognise that we are right and that the party the working class needs today is a revolutionary party.



NATIONAL MEETING

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BACK IN
BUSINESS**

Birmingham

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THE AGITATOR NETWORK

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